



## Further Discussion: Selecting Biography

1. Does the book begin in an engaging manner that draws the reader in? What does the author do in the beginning of the book to attract the reader?

*In researching information on the way children's learning develops today, evidence points to a decrease in attention span and greater importance for grabbing readers' attention "out of the shoot," so to speak. If an author can grab the readers' attention in the first paragraph, it is more likely a child will check a book out, and hopefully actually complete/read the book.*

2. Does the author give a balanced and humanistic portrayal of the individual's life?

*With all good intent, an author may wish to show respect to, even revere or worship, or in some other way exaggeratedly flatter or praise the individual about whom the book is written. In such cases the author may exaggerate events and difficulties or obstacles the individual had to overcome; heighten or showcase the achievements only; and/or purposely omit certain events or character flaws. Unfortunately, the effect of this may be to distance the reader from the text and decrease "honesty" for readers' relationship with the person the book is about.*

3. Is the text conversational or more encyclopedic in wording?

*If the book is written in a textbook or encyclopedic manner, rather than unique or otherwise engaging language perhaps the information that a reader would get from this book might actually be more easily rendered from an encyclopedia. In other words, there must be a reason for this book to be published beyond the Encyclopedia or other reference book.*

4. What is the overall order, format, and layout of the book? Is this the most appropriate or engaging format? For example, is the text written chronologically or in some other order? Has the author done anything unique with the book's format?

*Some of today's most engaging picture books are biographies of lesser-known individuals, written about someone who's not previously been a part of history studied. Some such titles have been written not as enhancement of curriculum, but rather to entertain, attract young readers, highlight unique successes, or simply as pleasure reading.*



5. Does the author consider other important components such as the time and place setting?

*It may not be so much how the author places the subject or character in text as much as how the author balances components of the setting that impact the subject's life. For example, when children read books about the Holocaust or the Civil War, they need information about the historic context in order to make sense of, and/or to truly understand the importance of some of the action by the biographical subject.*

6. Does the author take dramatic license? For example, does the author include dialogue, interpretation of events, or make assumptions about this person's life?

*Dramatic license most often happens when an author not only excludes their subject's flaws but exaggerates beyond the truthful events of the person's life. While not a common practice, this does happen.*

7. Are there important omissions?

*There might be important events that should be left out of a biography if for no other reason than they are not that important to the reader or to the person's fame. (Marital or family life, education, for example.) Omissions in describing the historic backdrop, however, may decrease clarity of understanding for the reader. There is a fine line in the omission's decision-making that authors must traverse.*

8. How important is the chronicling of this person's life for the intended audience of this book? Has this book contributed something about the person's life that has not already been well written or presented? In other words, why was this book written?

*Really, how many books about Abraham Lincoln are necessary? When a new book is published on the most biographed famous person's lives, what will make you purchase this new biography? What has this title contributed that all previous titles have not? An example might be that one where the author highlights with great detail just one event in the person's life.*

9. Would you want to own this book or have it in your collection? Why or why not?

*When you come across the book that you would consider purchasing and having on your personal bookshelf at home, you know it is a fabulous new biography. Why? Consider what's unique about this book?*



### 10. Is this a person that young people would want to read about?

*We have all had experiences of assigned reading or research by category (“Write a report about a President,” for example, or sometimes the teacher will expect a biography as one resource in a research project.) Of utmost importance, of course, are the persons themselves. Trends today find many obscure historical figures to have contributed something unique. This is a good thing.*

### 11. If the book is illustrated, are the illustrations an enhancement of—do they complement—the text? Illustrations in black-and-white or in color? Whenever possible are there primary source visuals such as photographs and letters? If there are no illustrations, what will draw the young reader in to want to read this book?

*Depending upon the historical time frame in which this person has lived, primary documents that include photographs or even websites referred to that show the biographed person during their life. Good biographers will include as many items as possible that can personalize the person featured in the biography. An example of this would be in a book about Martin Luther King, Jr., a reference to a video of his “I Have a Dream” speech would deeply enrich the reader’s understanding of MLK, the man and his vision. In biographies about individuals from pre-photography eras, letters and diaries can serve as intimate portrayals of a person’s life.*

### 12. Is the book free of didacticism?

*Worse perhaps than deletions, is when the writer uses didacticism to deliver the message: over-explaining the reader’s takeaway, over-emphasizing obstacles or heroism, offering explanations for context that can be more satisfyingly achieved in some other format. As with all children’s literature, the author must strike a balance between what a child wants to read, high literary standards, and a book that an adult will buy for children would. Read into the context of the book far enough to be able to consider the approach the author has taken to address all these. Has the author struck this balance?*